

Kevin Jenkins

## Cissexism and Precarity Perform Trans Subjectivities

Precarity is not experienced by all.
Rather, as Judith Butler (2009) notes, it is
the extreme state of precariousness—a
heightened exposure to institutional and
social violence imposed on marginalized
populations such as people of color,
non-white immigrants, people of nonChristian faiths, and LGBTQ+ people. Nor
does precarity impact the people in these
groups evenly. The three digital artworks
in this essay highlight some of the ways in
which trans people navigate precarity and
are performed by it.

What dialogue might this work create within the art education context and what are the potential pedagogical implications of this visual essay and by extension other creative work? Art education editors and reviewers often ask such questions. I wrestle with these types of questions. Given that this is a visual essay, what further elaboration/explication is required for the images herein? What do I want students to learn about precarity?

At the end of this visual essay, the \_\_\_\_ (author/teacher) should be able to:

Demonstrate that trans lives and experiences fit within the framework of Marylin Stewart and Sydney Walker's (2005) Enduring/Big Ideas, i.e. connecting the relevance of trans existence to art education.

There is precarity, or a heightened vulnerability, when one is called upon, whether this is intentional or unintentional, to validate and demonstrate how one's trans existence matters for art education.

There are also high risks when it comes to writing outcomes in advance. Doing so is not only prescriptive but also a missed opportunity for readers to insert/read themselves into the text. The alreadyread, according to Roland Barthes (1974), are "those who fail to reread [and] are obligated to read the same story everywhere" (p. 16). Rather than compose already-read-written outcomes, I invite readers to fill in the "blanks" to re-read/ re-story the images and text. Re-reading is an act of play rather than consumption (Barthes, 1974) that is closer to a reiterative process that could potentially result in plural and multivalent outcomes and actions.

At the end of this visual essay, the \_\_\_\_ (reader/teacher) should be able to:

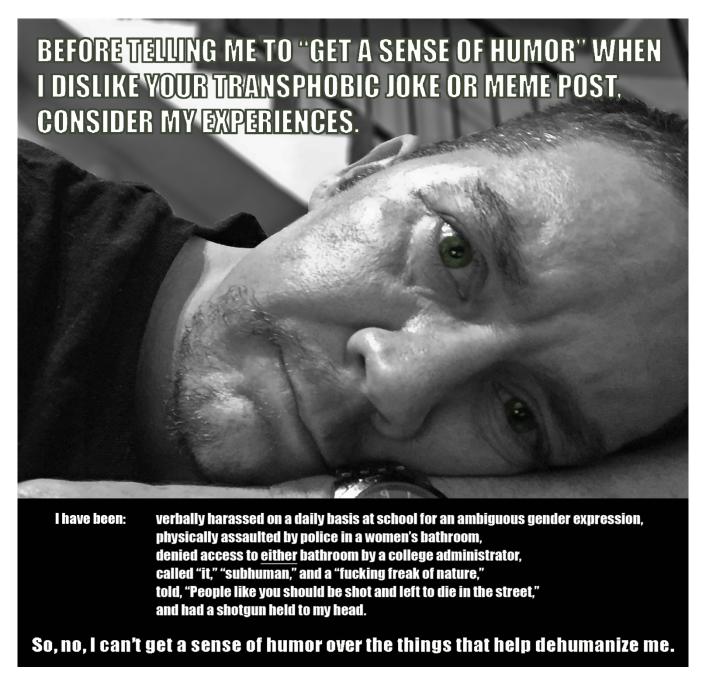
\_\_\_\_ (insert active verb here) that precarity, or heightened vulnerability, is relational, i.e., consider how their own actions generate precarity (e.g., cissexism and isolation), and explore possibilities to change, reduce, and remove the threat by doing the following \_\_\_ (insert action here).

Trans people face heightened levels of precarity such as extreme discrimination and bullying. The lifetime suicide attempt rate for trans and gender non-conforming people averages at 41% with the highest rate at 46% reported by trans men (Haas et al., 2014). I am one of the 46%. However, my suicidal ideation and attempts were not caused by being transgender in and of itself but rather due to cissexism, which Julia Serano (2007) explains as a belief in the validity and superiority of cis people's genders and lives and

the invalidity and inferiority of trans people's genders and lives. It is systemic cissexism that heightens precarity in legal, medical, educational, economic and social structures aimed at reducing the conditions for trans people to lead what Butler (2009) calls a livable life. It is systemic cissexism that also places trans people at risk of physical violence from others.

At the end of this visual essay, the \_\_\_\_ (reader/teacher) should be able to:

\_\_\_ (insert active verb here) the impact of their language and actions in the school and classroom environments for trans students (Focused.Arts.Media.Education, 2017; Pérez Miles & Jenkins, 2017).



*Image 1*, Humor and History.

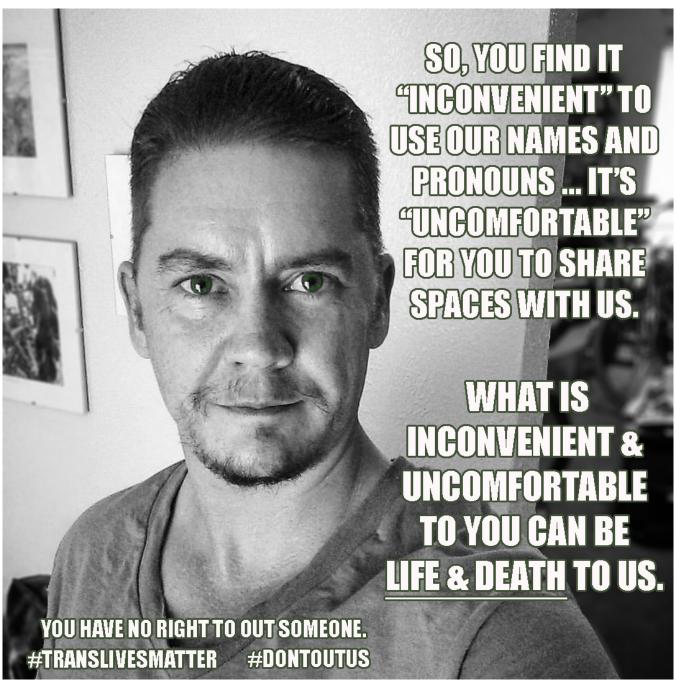


Image 2, Inconvient Truth.

\_\_\_ (insert active verb here) their language and actions to improve the school environment for trans students by \_\_\_ (insert action here).

Two of the artworks are photographic self-portraits with text. *Humor and History* speaks back to accusations of

oversensitivity to social media posts, often viral, that serve to mock and demean trans people and their lived experiences. *Inconvenient Truth* comments as well on the dismissiveness by some and aggression by others, including educators, who refuse trans-affirming protocols such as respecting new names and pronoun

In 1994, I was 23 and stranded in a high crime area of Fort Worth when my motorcycle broke down on the freeway. I walked along the access road to find a pay phone. It was late, and I was alone. A woman in a glittery green dress and heels approached me from the corner of an empty building—a former gas station gone out of business. She asked if I needed help. She knew I was Tost and afraid, even of her. I shook my head but then reached into my empty pockets. She took change from her purse and paid for my call. She looked around us and insisted she stay to look over me until my friends arrived. I turned to thank her when they did, but she was already gone. My hero that night was a trans woman of color and a sex worker. That may seem unlikely to most, but I know such bravery and resilience. I hope she too survived that night and all of them after.

Image 3, Unlikely Hero.

usage. Such refusals also expose trans people to ill treatment by others who witness these acts (Pérez Miles & Jenkins. 2017).

At the end of this visual essay, the (reader/teacher/editor/reviewer) should be able to:

(insert active verb here) how microaggressions or "subtle" slights whether they are intentional or unintentional hurt people (Niemann et al., 2020) and inflict harm on the psychological, emotional, and sometimes physical well-being of transgender people (Jenkins, 2018) by doing the following \_\_\_ (insert action here).

(insert active verb here) the ways that social media serve to mock and demean trans people but also function as gateways for these communities to build coalitions (Jenkins, 2018).

Unlikely Hero is a digital image with a short autobiographical tale depicting the empathy and kindness given the artist by a member of the most vulnerable of trans communities, trans women of color working in the sex trade, in which both people are held in tension between trust and hypervigilance during the encounter.

At the end of this visual essay, the (reader/teacher/editor/reviewer) should be able to:

\_\_\_ (insert active verb here) that trans lives matter by doing the following \_\_\_ (insert action here).

\_\_\_ (insert active verb here) how communities respond to conflicts to humanize or dehumanize marginalized populations that lead to calls for inclusion such as #translivesmatter and #blacktranslivesmatter.

At the end of this visual essay, editors and reviewers should be able to: Reflect upon the requirements they place upon vulnerable people to heighten one's precarity for publication.

Each work marks the conscious recognition of precarity that trans people must perform through and how that precarity permits some actions and denies others as we empathize and reach out, speak back as well as speak up, hide ourselves in isolation or present ourselves through the vulnerability of visibility in solidarity with one another.

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